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CONFERENCE ON RURAL READING
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Rural Americans, like all Americans, live in a demanding time. The patterns of their lives are changed almost from day to day by the quickened advance of science and by events in the farthest corners of the earth. These changes require them to be currently informed on a wide range of technical and economic affairs in order to conduct their own enterprises. They must help to make what are perhaps the gravest decisions any nation ever made, and on the most complex questions any nation ever faced. In a time of confusion and trouble, they feel the need to share both the understanding of the past and the new perceptions of persons here and abroad who see the future with fresh eyes.

There was never a time when it was more important that all Americans have a ready opportunity to learn to broaden their experience, to share new ideas. Our kind of democratic society can work only if the people who make it up have the means of keeping informed, of finding out the facts for themselves and making up their own minds.

This means that never before has the reading of books and journals been so important to the country. They give us the essential privilege of exploring and finding out for ourselves. They can afford us a solid background of knowledge; they help equip us for the dealing with the practical demands of our business; they set new views and ideas before us; they lay the whole thought of the world out where we can get at it ourselves without having it selected for us; and, above all, they stimulate our thinking and intellectual judgment. The habit of using books and the practical freedom to do so are indispensable in American life.

It is in rural areas of the country that the problem of access to these resources is gravest. The Public Library Inquiry has shown how seriously inadequate is library service outside large cities. A shocking proportion of rural residents do not have access to any public library whatever. Of those who do, few indeed have access to a good library service that can really meet their needs. Book stores, like libraries, cluster in cities, and few rural Americans have a real chance to choose books for personal buying. This situation makes difficult the full sharing of rural people in our cultural life and their most effective participation in public affairs.

The purpose of the Conference on Rural Reading being called by the Extension Service of the U. S. Department of Agriculture is to explore this problem and the possible means of solving it. It is clear that its solution will require both means of encouraging interest in reading



and means of making books realistically and conveniently accessible. It will need to take account of the program of Government agencies and farm organizations, of the library extension movement, of educational institutions, of the resources and services of the book industry, and of programs of work with women and youth, and of all other organizations and groups interested in rural life development. The conference will afford an opportunity to pool knowledge of what is already being done toward these various ends, to assess additional needs, to explore resources for further progress, and to draw interested groups together in order to facilitate each group's making its own fullest contribution to wider book reading in rural areas.